

## **FROM FAKE NEWS TO REAL NEWS WITH A TWIST: DISINFORMATION AND COVID-19 NARRATIVES**

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**Abstract:** *Given the major shift in perception, communication and identity triggered by the pandemic over the last two years, the use of digital tools to guide patterns of association, mobilization and action seems more powerful than ever. Although Fake News has been making headlines since the early days of globalization, its later developments revealed interesting conjectures on topics such as the rise of non-state hegemony, ascent of digital diasporas, deterritorialization, or post-politics. In this context, the distances between fake news and reality tend to be blurred by the intervention of interpretive bias, while the role of public's beliefs, latent iconography and power mythology becomes more critical. Following this argument, the paper looks at some of the emerging trends in fake news and master narratives in digital media, also tackling the implications triggered by their potential use in the context of hybrid confrontations.*

**Keywords:** *fake news; disinformation; COVID-19 narratives; infodemic; hybrid threats; edifices of shared meaning.*

### **Introduction**

Even if false information that imitates trustworthy sources is not new at all, fake news phenomena became lately more pervasive both in traditional and digital strategic channels (Parker et. al. 2020, 141-142). Unquestionably, nowadays evolution and maturation of the fake news debate remains connected with trends such as post-truth dimensions of populist speech (Althuis and Haiden 2018, 4-5), decreasing trust in traditional media or shifts occurring in the information landscape. However, these major reconfigurations of the public sphere were doubled by more specific and less visible transformations. Emergence of filter-bubbles, wherein isolated publics built their own agenda, revelation of the rhetoric conditions of the individuals, able from now on to create and distribute content or the power of spinning, generating false majorities and opinion flows, all opened the road for an increasing impact of hybrid confrontations. Involving practices such as subverting sovereignty, promoting non-democratic speech or simple spread of fake news, these unconventional threats recall a hybrid strategy of collective defense (Valášek, 2018, 28-30). Aiming to address these new challenges, redrawing the informational, political, and cultural landscape, the article employs a two-step methodology. The first part concerns a conceptual reconstruction of the notion of fake news, redefining fake news as narrative constructs able to trigger biased interpretations, mostly based on cultural stereotypes. The second part engages the case study method to provide a multi-layered analysis of the recent COVID-19 disinformation, connected to widespread anti-vaccine, anti-EU, and anti-globalist narratives.

## **1. Fake news. From false information to edifices of shared knowledge**

Contemporary attempts in developing a conceptual framework of fake news are still influenced by two key landmarks: the intention to deceive and the objective to harm or control. Academics and practitioners agreed to classify fake news into four categories: disinformation, misinformation, mal-information, and non-information (Parker et. al. 2020, 141-142). The term disinformation is traditionally defined as “constructed false message” transmitted to the opponent’s communication system, to deceive and influence the target public (Bittman 1984, 49). By picturing many of the “disinformation games” as actions designed to manipulate the decision-making elite, Ladislav Bittman’s influential book, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View*, highlights the role of public’s segmentation in achieving long term results through the instrumentality of false information (*Idem*). Following his perspective, public opinion is “just one of the potential targets” of false information, the dissemination of the initial stimulus in a more restricted environment assuring that further transmission will be accompanied by a veracity hypothesis. When decision-makers employ a certain point of view or promote a specific approach towards a dilemmatic social or political context, they also use other genuine argumentative elements. Thus they may transform the initial false message into complex content, perceived as authentic, if reiterates many of the public’s shared opinions and beliefs. Going one step further, Bittman argues that any “disinformation message must at least partially correspond to reality or generally accepted views” (*Idem*).

Yet, not every anti-establishment or critical public opinion should be considered as part of well-orchestrated propaganda campaign, since sentiments such as fear or rage may determine spontaneous concerns, affecting publics whose political preferences are far from radical or populist (*Idem*, 144). In this context, misinformation should be perceived as a non-intended mistake, conveyed as credible, but later corrected (Greifeneder et. al. 2021, 28). Misinformation is first defined by absence of intention in distorting the content and secondly by integration within target public’s beliefs. Yet, authors as Martin C. Libicki consider that within new cyberspace information warfare, the credibility of the information in general can be ruined by “adding false information to it to the point where the victim must choose between misinformation (believing what is not true) or disinformation (being unable to believe what is true)” (Libicki 2007, 57). Due to its dynamic nature, information can be thus altered in multiple ways, the distances amid classic formula of disinformation (constructed false message) and misinformation (unintended distorted content) being reduced by intervention of publics.

There are many situations in which individuals or groups tend to respond to emotional stimuli and generate misinformation. Cataclysms, pandemics, social conflicts are just some of the contexts when internet users share stories and testimonies that alter the initial picture by adding plausible or intuitive elements, that were missing from their direct experience. Whether it is about atrocities committed by adverse forces or presumed threats exerted by unknown enemies, this supplementary content is added as an affiliation gesture. False memories and false witness-accounts may indicate that “participants are reporting and/or selecting false information” under pressure exerted by post-event suggestions (Ridley et. al. 2013, 31). Thence, the disinformation strategies may lead to further distortion that could engage neutral publics, influenced by the cultural context they live in.

Furthermore, these trends are potentiated by information overload. Mal-information and non-information came into prominence as secondary effects enabled by digitalization and globalization of information. Scholars as C. Wardle and H. Derakhshan affirm that mal-information “is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 2). In case of mal-information the focus is not in faking the content, but in emphasizing sensitive aspects, to

determine partisanship and polarization within the reception of the message (Saez-Trumper 2019: 4). At the same time, a specific content can be classified as non-information if represents “irrelevant information that obfuscates, hides or covers real or true information sought by audiences” (Yiquan and Wenzel 2014, 634). Proliferation of unclear information, creating confusion, and recursion of conspiracy theories was directly influenced by spread of COVID-19. In this context, the infodemic label, signalize the presence of too much information including false or misleading content in digital and physical environments, during a disease outbreak (World Health Organization 2020).

However, the expansion of the fake news debate beyond the classical disinformation-misinformation interplay it is motivated also by other complementary evolutions. During the global pandemic, populist discourse shaped the perception of reality, employing dominantly the phantasmatic dimension of political speech and the narrative divide between the elites and “the real people” (Cervi et al. 2021, 291-294). The claim of separating society into antagonistic groups, based on “people vs. the establishment” equation, also triggered cultural and strategic consequences (Funke et. al. 2021, 1-5). Fake news term became politicized and used in correlation with adjectives as “corrupt”, “disgraceful” or “Enemy of the People” (*Idem*, 1-5), gradually creating a parallel reference. Moreover, the populists coined fake news as an interpretation and loyalty game, magnified with the support of social media.

Employing old tactics as the tendency to oversimplify the public agenda, polarizing and provocative discourses, appeals to nativist worldviews, prolongation and recovery of conspiracy theories or illusion of direct and unmediated communication with the leader, the populist actors (*Idem*, 1-12) exploited the social media logic, which tends to bring forward simple messages and emotional communication. The intersection of new media logic, populism and fake news generated what was called an “elective affinity” (Gerbaudo 2018, 746-747). Under these circumstances, the mal-information and non-information entered the fake news arena, especially as populist revision of false news significance employed the revival of cultural stereotypes, mythologies, and basic groups narratives. Even if academic literature generally defines the fake news as “false news intended to mislead audiences” (Parker et. al. 2020, 143), it is considered that the 2016 USA presidential elections served as a landmark in shifting the usage and term. Fake news became a tool used to dismiss information and facts that contradicted the mindset of a particular group, often having the function of closing the debate. One interesting consequence derived from this semantic renegotiation refers to the fact that the public’s inherent beliefs and attitudes can shape the reception of fragmentary or partisan information, creating the meaning in a way which almost excludes outside control. No matter if it is about rejecting globalism, denouncing elites or distribution of social culpability, the populist mindset invites to uniformity and a decoupage technique in relating to the informational space. Jair Bolsanaro or Donald Trump strategies in molding the narrative around pandemic remain relevant case studies for this framing approach (Cervi et al. 2021, 296).

Quite often fake news could employ content that is received as novel, sensational, compelling, and activating a natural emotional response. This feature argued for the analysis of the phenomenon within an ecosystem of related terms as: ‘truthiness’ and ‘post-fact’ or deep fakes (Parker et. al. 2020, 146). First concept, truthiness implies the circumstances and context in which the credibility of a fact, an information or event seems to be acceptable for the general opinion (Berthon and Pitt 2018, 2020). More important, truthiness covers a perceptual predisposition, reduced to the catchphrase “the world is as you wish it” (*Idem*, 220). A strong example for this approach is offered by global patterns of anti-vaxxer lobbies, that engage tactics based on rejection of the basic information upon the subject and use of emotional opinions. Blending simultaneously archaic nostalgia with fear, social rejection syndrome, national mythification and millennialism, the anti-vaxxer movement offers the picture of a

distorted truthiness. A closely related element the term of post-fact may be defined as “taking a position that ignores facts” (*Idem*, 221). Known also as alternative facts strategy, the term was epitomized during a press release in 2017, when Trump’s advisor Kellyanne Conway used the phrase as an exit strategy for avoiding relating the basic facts. In the end, another interconnected element of the discussion is the term of deep fake.

As a generally definition, deep fake implies the creation of false audio and video content, which presents sensational, offensive, or dramatic facts (Citron and Chesney 2018). The main role of deep fakes is to spin the trends, generating an emotional response based on rage, fear, and shock. Deep fakes tend to determine major reputational consequences, even if later fact checking exposes their falsehood. A good example for the use of this technique is the disclosure of a fake video, picturing Barack Obama using offensive language against Donald Trump (Parker et. al. 2020, 147). Intrinsically, the target audiences resonated to what they wanted, and what they were used to believe, even if the authenticity of the content was by far questionable. Yet, despite all that, the damage caused by release of such deep fake lingered in the background, due to intervention of undersurface mechanisms such as: cyclical memory, recovering fragmentary recollection of the facts, ingravescence of social divides, confirmed by emotionally appealing digital content and not lastly, the illusion of authenticity and direct participation in the circle of events.

All the elements mentioned above depend in a critical manner on the “connections between one’s worldview and one’s perception of the truth” (Althuis and Haiden 2018, 9-11). Scholars as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the way an individual or a group judge a statement to be true or false is decided by their understanding of the context. There is a strong connection between metaphoric systems and the claim of coherence (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 23). Following Benedict Anderson’s approach to national identity, seen as imaginative shelter of a dynamic narrative (Anderson 2006, 16), the shared knowledge needs to assure the prolongation of a structure. In this context, the basic narratives that incorporate the opinions, value-systems, way of thinking, identity, ideology engagement and main viewpoints of an individual, represent the edifices of “shared meaning” (Althuis and Haiden 2018, 9-11). Generally, edifices of shared meaning are constructed through language and grounded on imageries and metaphor. They are constantly circulated through the instrumentality of media channels, but also contain a latent dimension. S. Huntington’s seminal work in political anthropology revealed the presence of a silent cultural pact in American society, proved by the emotional use of the national flag during times of uncertainty and crisis (Huntington and Dunn 2004, 3). The central hypothesis employing the edifices of shared meaning stipulates that the reception of sensational headlines, breaking news announcements or traditional fake news is influenced by their interactions with the basic shared narratives of the individual. This inherent conceptual framework operates dichotomic cuts within the mainstream information flow, favoring instead biased and partisan information. Contemporary audiences are decoding the political speech or the apparently benign false news through a rhetorically constructed conceptual framework (Althuis and Haiden 2018, 9-11). Effects of this closed interpretative circle, expelling the other side’s perspective or translation of facts are further potentiated by a set of structural evolutions.

Tendencies such as the decline of scriptural information and ascent of an image-oriented culture influence the reception and perception of news, real or fake. The tribalization of image implies a decline of the group memory since the image represents an inherently metaphoric construct. The image itself has no unique meaning and can be reinterpreted in a perpetual semiotic circle. The case of false witness accounts promoting images of violence and abuse offer a critical sample of this boomerang effect. During the Ukrainian crisis a great part of the Russian active measures and hybrid approaches focused on superposing stereotypes of World War II upon present events (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016, 3-6). The master narrative was built

around images of old people in Donbas region, depicted as poorly dressed in the near vicinity of their destroyed houses, while in the background an emotional or patriotic soundtrack was running (*Idem*, 3-6). The edifices of shared meaning were put in motion to validate the story, even if the facts were contradicted by other media statements or individual testimonies. Within the same hybrid conflict, images picturing the outrage of the population and the rejection of the Russian intervention were circulated under the false claim of disavowing the ‘fascist’ abuses of the Ukrainians (*Idem*, 8). The situation in which we cannot agree on basic facts and the falsehood or authenticity of a message is arbitrarily decided by the viewer, announces an interrelated trend.

Filter bubbles can be defined as ideological frames (Pariser 2011, 12), generated by algorithm tendencies to deliver search results that fit the consumer profile, interests, and information behavior. Personalized news streams promote a segregation of agendas ending in ideological media territories. Filter bubbles imply intellectual isolation (Bozdag, 2013, 209), perceptive biases, confirmation fallacies and not least the illusion of a flattened, simplified, and tangible information space. Apparently, we may access real data around the globe, but all the search filters interposed amid the presumed reality and the user tend to reiterate the subject’s view points and opinions. Filter bubbles may be equaled with a dynamic representation of the edifices of shared meaning, since the individual adhesion toward certain values, political models, or social manifestos is constantly recreated through the instrumentality of interactive information flows. Trumpism ascension and electoral winnings were explained in relation with this type of disruption of the information landscape (Baer, 2016). Personalized content was made responsible for shadowing the other perspectives, while fragmented publics distributed in insulated online communities created a mass self-communication (Baer, 2016). Genesis of rhetorical arenas enabling individuals to create, share and promote content on a scale never seen before, changed the traditional mediatization models. The new discovered symmetry between users and media players, proven by proliferation of labels as collaborative journalism, participatory reporting or citizens press, influenced in a critical manner the information selection mechanisms. The rhetorical revelation offered the anonymous users the opportunity to control the content, to start trends or even to act as game-changers in relation with media outlets.

Donald Trump’s victory was possible under special circumstances, while the public was divided within filter bubbles and echo chambers, wherein the anonymity determined a decrease of civic and politic accountability. Individuals were liberated from formerly assumed political activism and could use the faceless virtual crowd as a cultural canvas for revealing formerly repressed or latent traditionalist or nativist affinities. At the same time, radicalization of micro-publics was connected to confirmation biases and also grounded in subsidiary processes such as the gamification of politics. Starting with Italy’s social media populism, materialized in Matteo Salvini “likeability strategy” (Bobba 2019, 12) to America’s dark experience of viral news, filter bubbles and echo chambers reconstructed the anatomy of the public opinion. In this manner non-information and mal-information gained relevance as strategic communication tools, able to circulate identity constructs and to shape the receptivity of certain audiences. Exploitation of edifices of shared meaning as complex forms of propaganda, inaugurated a new phase in fake news symptomatology, since they proved to be available to various actors, including grassroots movements, hybrid influencers, anti-establishment parties or populist moves.

In this context, hybrid challenges could be shifting from traditional players such as states, economic lobbies, security blocs or ideological moves to new malign and benign digitally constructed communities. Keeping in mind the aspects highlighted before, the following section addresses the intersections amid nowadays COVID-19 disinformation and the employment of cultural stereotypes, shared meanings, and fake news in the context of hybrid threats.

## **2. Hybrid tensions and COVID-19 fake news in recent Europe. Analyzing the narratives**

The evolution of COVID-19 disinformation was strongly influenced by a set of interrelated trends such as information overload, polarization of opinions, societal divides and revival of nativist and millennialism affinities. Around the world, populism and anti-democratic forces tried to hijack the discourse on pandemic, while various state and institutional bodies were facing serious difficulties in building a response strategy against this complex crisis. Initially, disinformation was concentrated on the cause of the COVID-19 crisis, the primary narratives targeting China's strategic and politic culpability. At the very beginning, COVID-19 blame game was seen as an upgraded version of a cold conflict between United States and China (Horsley, 2020). The prospects of this confrontation were unclear at that time, the global diffusion of the virus determining, however, a change of the initial narratives. Once Europe experienced a gradual aggravation of the sanitary crisis, materialized in lockdown measures and various restrictions, disinformation crossed a localization and adaption process. In this context, COVID-19 narratives became "culturally tailored", reflecting the structural fractures and the important debates in each society (Serrano et al. 2020). A general survey of the narratives used in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the presence of five main typologies: health fears, lockdown fears, false cures, conspiracy theories and identity and political dispersion (*Idem*). Usually, the first three categories of narratives relate to the traditional model of fake news, employing the use of distorted information to achieve emotional responses on a certain topic. It may involve decontextualized photos and videos, appeal to fictive authority voices, doctors or researchers or impersonating the media or authorities, using false documents or deep fake content. The health fears proved to be a source for further interpretation and declination of narratives, much of the initial fake news originated under this label demonstrating an interesting uniformity. As an example, videos apparently presenting corpses of Chinese abandoned on the streets of Wuhan, were circulated in various European countries and induced panic responses, even after the false was exposed (Reuters, 2020). The visual disinformation associated to COVID-19 pandemic had a peculiar trajectory also due to diversification and fragmentation of communication channels.

Involvement of instant messaging apps complicated the facts even more, since it forced individual users to react and evaluate the content in insolated environments. In defiance to social media fake news, which rely heavy of snowballing and supportive false majorities, the texting disinformation was more difficult to pursue and counteract since it was exploiting the individual's social, cultural and informational bubble. Disinformation moved from social networks to text, mostly because lack of reactive options on behalf of regulators and institutions. Debunking of the fake news campaigns and deconstruction of their narratives was hindered furthermore by the exploitation of strong symbolic components. The call for unity, social change or civil disobedience was made in most of the cases under auspices of national, ethnic, or religious empowerment.

An example for this new disruptive practice is offered by the text messages and social media posts distributed in France in the early stages of COVID-19 crisis, advising citizens to act responsibly and to limit social interactions, as a presumed number of cases were already confirmed in their near vicinity (Banet, 2020). The information was launched in January 2020, when text messages and print screens of posts announcing COVID-19 cases in different French cities were circulated on social networks and instant messaging apps (*Idem*). The social media posts were apparently distributed by well-known media actors as BFMTV and they did not entail any criticism upon government or protest and mobilization action calls (*Idem*), while the text messages had no source indicated. Use of simple language, the appeal to social responsibility and apparently lack of perceptible benefits for the spread of this information

assured a spectacular permeability of the target groups. Although the information was soon declared false, the effects of the campaign remain strong. The main problem raised by this type of fake news resides in the difficulty to isolate and confirm the true beneficiaries. This sort of disinformation strategy affected the social climate in France, stimulated emotional responses, determined a decrease of credibility for the media system and created an environment favorable for further disinformation and misinformation. The primary false content could be linked to actions of multiple players. International security hegemony as Russian Federation or internal disruptive groups are constantly targeting a degradation of the social and political environment of the EU countries. The use of fabricated false content could serve in this case in stimulating social panic, mistrust regarding actions and competence of government and the need for immediate intervention. Populist or authoritarian political offers often benefit on behalf of this type of disinformation, recent evolutions hosted by countries as Poland or Hungary calling for reflection.

Decline of common social and cultural landmarks and downfall of mainstream media generated paradoxical interpretations of information. Infiltration of fake news was operated within the instrumentality of pervasive channels as texting, social media groups or even brochures. Social media infodemic perceptible on various channels as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit just prepared the grounds for this strategic tournament (Cinelli et. al. 2020). Yet, individual responses to COVID-19 disinformation reflected a departure from traditional models of action and determined a reconfiguration of the stimulus-response theory (Barua et. al. 2020).

The fake news or tendentious content could be considered as a stimulus, while the personal evaluation of the target groups may play the function of feedback. Information it is tested, evaluated, and accepted as it passes the credibility test (*Idem*). Some approaches choose to address the disinformation patterns in relation with cultural benchmarks, rather than invoking the specific structure of the distorted content. Following this narrative logic, other classification of the COVID-19 related disinformation may be reduced to three categories: general misinformation beliefs, conspiracy beliefs and religious misinformation beliefs (*Idem*). This sort of reconfiguration of the theoretical debate proves once again the complex dynamic of the phenomenon and highlights the leading role of cultural backgrounds in organizing the public reactions. General misinformation beliefs as “Coronavirus is not heat-resistant and will be killed in a temperature of 26-27 degrees” or “the virus does not settle in the air but on the ground, so it is not transmitted through the air” entered the informational space almost unnoticed (World Health Organization, 2020). Unreliable information generates mistrust, skeptical attitudes and builds a basic cultural frame that rejects other perspectives (Fakhrudin et al. 2020), even if initially, this filter seems less obvious. Conspiracy beliefs, as news claiming that COVID-19 represents a biological weapon, are based on a collective interest upon the subject of bioterrorism, already present in the information environment. In the same manner, religious disinformation beliefs are only partially directed by religious bodies’ interests in exploiting the pandemic. Nevertheless, religious groups aim to play a substantial role in influencing people’s behaviors, fundamentalist actors around the globe competing to monopolize the spotlight of COVID-19 narratives, but grassroots response remain hard to predict and control. It is difficult to acquire control upon religious discourse since official messages can be shadowed by disruptive content. A good example of these disturbances is shown by the Romanian society divide with respect to the subject of COVID-19 pandemic religious implications. Despite the Romanian Orthodox Church’s endorsement of vaccination, anti-vaxxer propaganda continued to successfully exploit religious semiotics and arguments in controlling the conspiracy narratives (Dascălu et. al. 2021). All anti-vaxxer protests shown in mainstream media or reflected by support groups in the digital space engage religious and

nationalist symbolism, often flattening the narrative until it is reduced to a patriotic call. In Romania's case, the circulation of basic edifices of shared meaning, such as the national narrative, creates complex costs in deconstructing and limiting the COVID-19 related disinformation. Mixing national flags with religious iconography and traditional village semiotics, anti-vaxxers move targets a recognition, affiliation, and loyalty game. Drawing on arguments of Barua and others, it may be considered that the borders among disinformation, misinformation and persuasive employment of cultural frames are blurred by the intervention of an emotional selection mechanism. Reliance on emotion promoted belief in false information, as several studies demonstrated a connection amid emotional messages and the decrease of discernment. Given the fact that "greater emotionality is associated with heightened belief in fake news and decreased discernment between real and fake news" (Martel 2020, 15), the use of edifices of shared meaning as vehicles for asserting partisan reflections of reality remains a tactic difficult to restrain. Debunking simple false news is targeting the exposure of untrustworthy sources or distorted content, while denunciation of cultural partisanship requires more subtle interventions.

Going back to the conspiracy and societal divide equations of fake news, a tendency toward "globalization of disinformation" was observed (Serrano 2020). The power of shared narratives resides in their capacity to structure and make sense of a chaotic reality. Previously, this function was assumed by traditional media outlets, made responsible for selection, organizing, and translating events into a common narrative, communicated afterwards to a national audience. However, digitalization implied a reconfiguration of the media patterns. The national publics are now replaced by thematic audiences, fragmented interest bubbles, infotainment consumers and other emerging categories that defy the idea of a common agenda. Even if these insulated audiences apparently support and validate the same narrative, the drivers for such reactions may be substantially different. For example, fake news concerning false cures and lockdown fears act initially as benign entry doors of nativist discourses. This layer of fake news targets cultural affinities such as environmentalist concerns and civic disobedience, inducing a gradual contextualization of the COVID-19 debate. Biased interpretation and reception of the COVID-19 disinformation may thus be perceived as a long-term process, exploiting the preexistent social divides and cultural cleavages. Segregation of the moderate and noninvolved publics and their gradual persuasion is obtained through simple and iterative means. In this context, identity and political polarization may be achieved by inflaming and circulating the latent fears and representation of a society.

Recent media dynamic disclosed that an array of far-right analogies is used to attract support and engage audiences in what was represented as a critical social and political action call. Proliferation of labels as sanitary dictatorship or COVID conspiracy engages peculiar translation within certain cultural contexts. Western Balkans and Easter Europe as a whole, experience a degradation of their democratic climate in connection with COVID-19 disinformation, carried simultaneously by well-known security hegemony and regional and local challengers. Presumed information campaigns developed both by Moscow and Beijing targeted two key messages: European citizens are vulnerable because they cannot trust their political systems and authoritarian rule may save the situation (Bentzen, 2020, 2). The main concern created by these trends is that a mix of disinformation and health diplomacy echoed also by various proxies in Europe and not only, may end in a wider influence in other sectors in aftermath of the crisis (*Idem*, 3). Health diplomacy could be defined as the practice by which states and international relations actors develop policies and programs dedicated to the improvement of global health. Nowadays, the use of the term concerns predominantly the Russian Federation's efforts to create a positive perception upon its international role and regional and global legitimacy, through instrumentality of medical help offered during COVID-19 crisis. When Moscow sent several military planes loaded with medical equipment to help



Italy to manage the COVID-19 crisis, the international perception was one of a soft power exercise (Valenza 2020, Leight 2021). Going one step further, the vaccine diplomacy played an important part in renegotiation of Russia's power brand, assuring a more positive image in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe (*Idem*). Information overload, narrative control, digital divides, and politicization of data will continue to convey the message that authoritarian nationalism is the only viable answer to nowadays sanitary, cultural, and political crises, while people are apparently pressed to choose between security and freedom (*Idem*, 3). By exploiting alienation and marginality of certain social clusters, the COVID-19 disinformation prepares a post-pandemic topic of narrative operations. However, Chinese "coronavirus diplomacy" and Moscow's aid strategy, by excellence a continuation of long span hybrid operations, could face serious competition. The employment of tactics such as concealing, disguising, coopting, penetrating, and manipulating, along with spreading conspiracy theories and increasing social polarization may determine the activation of influential edifices of shared knowledge. It was already proven that employment of identity narratives and cultural stereotyping may shift opinions and antagonize audiences on various topics and agendas. The pandemic context will come to an end, but the consequences of these unforeseen mobilizations of cultural manifestos may determine a privatization of hybrid conflicts.

The hybrid warfare label can be applied to a range of phenomena related to war and culture (Gunneriusson 2021). However, present evolution in the informational space may enable the empowerment of discrete players, exploiting the volatility and multivalence of shared narratives. The national identity argument was circulated by governments, security hegemony, grassroots moves and not least spontaneous domestic initiatives. Many European countries tried to control the national tale and to expel a hybrid use of shared identities. Yet France and Germany confronted with radicalization of anti-vaxxer protests, using nationalist arguments, while Eastern Europe disclosed an interesting conjecture amid nation and religion. Recovery of nativist claims and millennialism discourses is not new at all, Kremlin making a staple from its "return to tradition" arguments circulated on European grounds long before the Crimean case in 2014. What seems to change is the availability of such means to new entities and groups. The present dynamics of the informational realm could impose a new set of working hypotheses. First, digitalization made almost impossible to control the spread of information, while the associative patterns of individuals and the modelling of social networks also remain open to malign influences. Secondly, paradoxes of identity enabled by digital communities may determine a decline of social contracts and cultural pacts. Internet is hosting faceless crowds, mixing trolls, bots, and real individuals, and offering a fluid impression of legitimacy or majority. Reunited, these background effects may announce a new stage of hybrid threats, considering that shared narratives are already claimed by unexpected beneficiaries.

## Conclusions

Neither fake or real, the news gained nowadays an interpretive layer, aggregated in the eye of the beholder. Keeping in mind Lakoff's metaphor upon edifices of shared knowledge, contemporary weaponization of social and news media may put under scrutiny previous models of social action in favor of a narrative and story-based rationality. Perhaps it is not enough to blend the right ingredients into the image-oriented and digitally based emerging culture, to achieve a desired result. Yet, the new visual syntax of contemporary news, along with other critical trends such as liquefaction of borders amid private and public space, decline of national identities, generational segregation or globalization-glocalization interplay modify the power balance in the information sphere. Nation states and international organizations face competition from shadow communities, spontaneous associative entities, or dormant cultural

groups. Hybrid threats are multiplying in connection with key matters such as civil disobedience, netwars, soft power and not at least monopolies upon interpreting and contextualizing truth, religion, and justice. Breaking news journalism and algorithmic populism (Maly 2020, 445) opened the road for distorted information selection, but the main beneficiaries of this historical fracture may not be the intended ones.

Previously, the hybrid label was employed predominantly in connection with Russia's activities in cyber operations and coercive diplomacy. Yet, attention-based media systems enhanced a democratization of populist techniques (Idem, 463), and made hybrid operations available to other players. Proxies, anti-establishment parties, and grassroots movements can negotiate their intervention in the hybrid conflicts, using classical disinformation tactics or innovative cultural methods, such as circulation of shared identity narratives. Intersections amid fake news, cultural backgrounds and populism have demonstrated the impact of soft power in undermining the existence of the European project itself. Russian and Chinese narratives were considered responsible for conspiracy theories proliferation and radicalization of certain audiences, but in time, the narratives may perpetuate and evolve autonomously, creating even more disinformation. This unfolding is further enabled by conjugated actions of image-based news and the digital version of the sleeper effect. Traditional delayed persuasion obtained through repetition of the key messages may determine a selective bias. The sources of the content or the context within the message delivered are obscured by the recirculation of the image, its special syntax expelling a unique interpretation. Traditional security hegemony or rising contenders exploited conspiracy or polarization narratives, transmitted through stereotypically visuals, but their final trajectory within the digital space remains unknown. In this ever changing symbolic and strategic battle, who the true spin doctors are, is yet to be seen.

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